



**Pastoral Letter of the Bishop of Nottingham  
appointed to be read at all Masses  
celebrated on the First Sunday of Lent  
Saturday 13 / Sunday 14 February 2016**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

So many people, including young people, are returning to the Sacrament of Reconciliation; through this experience they are discovering a path back to the Lord, living a moment of intense prayer, and finding meaning in their lives. Let us place the sacrament of Reconciliation at the centre once more, in such a way that it will enable people to touch the grandeur of God's mercy with their own hands.<sup>1</sup>

These are the encouraging words of Pope Francis who, most especially in this Jubilee Year of Mercy, would like the Season of Lent to be a time when each of us personally experiences God's merciful love in confession. Early in his Papacy, he described himself as 'a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon with his merciful love'. Indeed, in all that he says and in his actions, Pope Francis shows himself to be someone who knows his own need of God's mercy, who has experienced that mercy and been changed for the better by it, and who desires to be a channel of that mercy to others. 'Merciful like the Father' is the motto he has chosen for this Year of Mercy.

While it is true that people are rediscovering how spiritually helpful it is to go regularly to confession, there are still many Catholics who no longer make use of this wonderful sacrament of God's forgiveness and healing mercy. The sad reality is that very many of us struggle to believe in God's merciful love. We find it difficult to

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy *Misericordiae vultus*, 11 April 2015, 17.

accept that God forgives our sins, just like the loving Father in the Gospel story of the Prodigal Son; and that he rejoices so greatly when we turn back to him to express our sorrow and our desire to receive his forgiveness. So we end up carrying with us the burden of our sins from the past, rather than accepting the invitation to put them down at the foot of the Cross of Jesus in confession, and allowing ourselves to be embraced by his words of forgiveness, conveyed to us through the ministry of his priests.

This is why we need to listen to Pope Francis, who reminds us that ‘God’s mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive’.<sup>2</sup> It is helpful also to reflect upon the wise words of St Augustine of Hippo, who was far from being a saint in his youth, but who later came to accept God’s merciful love and forgiveness. His encouraging advice to us is: ‘Entrust the past to the mercy of God, the present to his love, the future to his providence.’

I would like to join Pope Francis in urging Catholics throughout our Diocese to open their hearts this Lent to God’s merciful love and forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In an attempt to make this a little more possible, there will be extra deanery celebrations of this Sacrament throughout Lent in many parts of the Diocese. I will be leading some of the services, and both I, and a team of priests, will be available to hear confessions.

In addition, as a further response to what Pope Francis is asking of churches all over the world, some parishes will be opening their churches for much of the twenty-four hours from Friday 4<sup>th</sup> to Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> March. This initiative, called ‘24 Hours for the Lord’, is intended to be an opportunity to deepen our personal relationship with the Lord in adoration, and to rediscover the wonderful personal encounter with God’s mercy which is available to us in confession. For much of this period of twenty-four hours, there will be continuous adoration before the Lord, present in the Blessed Sacrament, and priests available to hear confessions or simply to have a chat with anyone who wishes.

So, if you know of people who haven’t been to Church and the Sacrament of Reconciliation for a while, but who might welcome the opportunity to spend time before the Lord in adoration and go to confession, please do let them know about these Lenten opportunities. It would be a wonderful act of mercy in itself if you felt able to offer to accompany them to church, or to meet them there, when adoration and confessions are available. Reassure them that they will be gently guided through the Sacrament of Reconciliation by the priest concerned, and will

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

experience only great compassion, understanding and mercy. Because, as Pope Francis constantly reminds priests, they must be authentic signs of God the Father's mercy, 'always, everywhere, and in every situation, no matter what'.<sup>3</sup>

The details of the service for your area can be found on the diocesan website, as well as on a poster at the back of your church – please take a copy and give it to a friend, or put it up in your front window.

Lent is a grace-filled season of the Church's life; it is therefore an opportune time to respond to God's invitation to repent and change our lives for the better; a good time to allow our hearts to be healed and transformed by God's mercy in Confession. God never tires of reaching out to us. He is always ready to forgive, and his mercy can also empower and enable us to become more merciful towards others – something that, left to ourselves, most of us find very difficult. All this is God's wonderful work. What is asked of us is the humility to recognise what God is offering us, and an openness of heart and mind to accept it.

A good way to prepare for the Sacrament of Reconciliation is to reflect prayerfully upon some of the Gospel stories that Jesus tells to illustrate God's mercy. This year we are following Luke's Gospel, which is often called 'the Gospel of God's mercy' because it includes some of the best known parables of God's merciful love, such as the prodigal son, the lost sheep, the lost coin, the good Samaritan, and the Pharisee and the publican, to name but a few. All these parables have the power to speak to, and to challenge, our own lives, particularly our understanding of our relationship with God and our relationship with others. Helpful notes on some of these parables of mercy have been prepared and sent out to all parishes, religious houses and chaplaincies, for group or individual use. I would encourage you to ask for a copy and to reflect prayerfully on one or two of these parables as a way of preparing for confession.

Make this Lent memorable for yourself, by entrusting your sins to God's mercy and your life to his transforming grace in this great sacrament; you will not be disappointed!

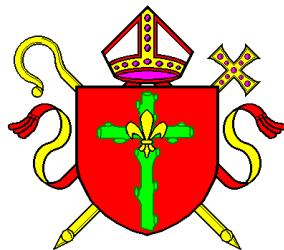
Please keep me in your prayers, and know that you and your loved ones are in mine.

+ Patrick

Rt Rev Patrick McKinney  
Bishop of Nottingham

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.



**Bishop's House  
Nottingham**

**February 2016**